

CLAUSEWITZ AND THE GULF WAR

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INTRODUCTION

Our victory in the Gulf War was extraordinary. Armed forces have rarely achieved such a great victory at such low costs. How did we achieve such a low-cost victory?

One reason for the victory lies in our tremendous technological advantages, which allowed us to destroy what we wanted when we wanted. Another reason was that Saddam inexplicably waited for our action -- we had the initiative.

These are important reasons for our victory, but I believe one of the principal reasons we won was our ability to think about war better than the Iraqis. Without good thinking, the best technology and the most capable men are useless -- perfunctory cogs in the machine of wartime violence. Theory provides a conceptual framework and an intellectual path for thinking about politics and war. One theorist in particular had a significant influence on use of the military instrument in the Gulf War -- Clausewitz. Our strategists adapted some of Clausewitz's important theories to the modern age and used them to plan political and military activities in the Gulf War.

INTERESTS AND POLICY

We had vital interests in the Gulf. To satisfy our interests, we developed political objectives. As Clausewitz would have hoped, political objectives dictated use of the military instrument to prosecute war. Our objectives also constrained movement toward war's theoretical extreme, where uncontrolled and purposeless violence reign. Additionally, our

political objectives constrained military objectives, weapons, and intensity of violence. Overall, Clausewitz would have approved of how political ends and military means related, with one exception.

Our political leaders failed to articulate clearly that Saddam's abdication was a significant and realistic political objective. Moreover, we declined to use military means to attain that objective and satisfy the end-state. Quite simply, we hoped Saddam would oblige our wishes and leave Iraq without causing us to resort to an appreciable increase in violence.

Clausewitz believed a war's outcome can't be forecast accurately. Once political leaders used the military instrument as a means to political ends, friction, or unexpected chance events, could cause political and military end-states different from those initially identified. Clausewitz believed passion and emotion could cause increased levels of violence, leading to increases in uncertainty and chance. He also believed the fog of war and uncertainty could cause unforeseen events and situations.

Because of uncertainty of outcomes in war, we need to be flexible enough to modify our political objectives and modify constraints on violence. In the Gulf War, we annihilated Iraqi's Kuwait Theater of Operations (KTO) army totally and quickly. Since war is "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will," we had the leverage to cause Saddam's abdication. We occupied his territory, destroyed his means to maintain power, and controlled Iraq's economy. But, because our stated

objectives were inflexible, we didn't use military means to force Saddam's abdication. We didn't have the will to escalate force to attain our idealistic political objective. In this situation, with a ruthless and tough opponent like Saddam, measured increases in force could have caused him to leave or his people to rise up against him.

As a corollary, Clausewitz believed wars never end in a single, short blow. Losers generally feel national embarrassment toward themselves and hatred toward the winner. Therefore, failure to modify our objectives and use force to compel our opponent to accept our will could cause problems with Iraq for years. Clausewitz would have scorned our timidity in using the force at our disposal to attain this political objective and our understanding of war and politics in this situation.

THE OPPONENT: A 20TH CENTURY VARRO

One of Clausewitz's greatest theories recognized war as a duel--a collision of two living forces. Clausewitz believed that the interactive nature of the opponent influenced levels of violence, contributed to the unknown outcomes of combat, and inhibited war's movement to its extreme.

Clausewitz recognized the importance of gauging our opponent. By gauging our opponent, we could attempt to understand who he is, how he thinks, and how he might respond to our action. By gauging our opponent, we could also assess his moral attributes, like will, valor, perseverance, and judgment.

We could have gauged our opponent better. Although trying

to gauge different cultures, ethos, and intellects is difficult, gauge them we must. In particular, we could have improved our efforts to find leverage for compelling Saddam to accept our will. In Desert Shield, no diplomatic tools worked. After we used violence in Desert Storm though, we forced some concessions. But our reasoning went astray because of wishful thinking. We hoped defeat would compel Saddam to abdicate. We misjudged his resilience; only more violence and higher costs to him would have forced abdication.

In contrast, we did well in implementing Clausewitz's theory of centers of gravity. Clausewitz defined center of gravity as the "hub of all power and movement on which everything depends." Clausewitz believed in a single center of gravity and attacking it with great force. Clausewitz's broad notion of center of gravity remains the same today. But, specifically, because of war's increased complexity, multiple centers of gravity exist at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. In the Gulf War, we attacked most of these centers of gravity with great synchronization and fury. These attacks caused paralysis in decision making, destruction of the Republican Guards, destruction of command, control, and communications (C3), retardation of Iraq's capability to wage future war, and influence on Iraq's will. Clausewitz would have been pleased with how we used his theories about center of gravity to think and to destroy intelligently.

POLITICAL AND MILITARY STRATEGY

Clearly, our interests weren't survival interests; thus, we fought a limited war, in a Clausewitzian sense. Our political leaders understood our interests, developed appropriate objectives from them, and used suitable means to attain those objectives, except for the objective pertaining to Saddam.

Our leaders followed Clausewitz's theory about the trinity of war. Clausewitz believed that primordial violence, rationality, and chance and creativity comprised the trinity of war. He believed that each of the three elements: violence, as emotions of the people; rationality, as government; and chance and creativity as the commander and his army, must be kept in balance. If the balance tilted, the nature of the war could change. Clausewitz also believed will was the glue that held the trinity together -- will of the people, army, and government.

President Bush coordinated and directed efforts to keep our trinity balanced. He paid attention to the beliefs, thoughts, values, and emotions of the American people because of their relationship to national will. President Bush also ensured the political apparatus remained firmly in control of the trinity. But, after establishing political objectives, constraints, and resources, he let the military use their professionalism, technology, and creativity to accomplish the political objectives. President Bush had to keep other trinities of war in mind too -- our allies, Iraq, and neutrals. He did exceptionally well in keeping trinities balanced, and unbalanced, in the case

of Iraq.

Clausewitz believed that defense and offense formed a continuum. He believed defense was the stronger form of war because of positioning, gaining time, gathering strength like a coiling spring, and depleting the strength of an attacking force. Clausewitz believed though, since defense and offense were a continuum, at some time the defenders would unleash the "flashing sword of vengeance" and strike against a weakened foe. In this line of thought, the defender couldn't hope to win without assuming the offense and attaining a decision.

We executed the defense-offense continuum in two phases. For Desert Shield we defended, built up forces, and prepared for the offense. For Desert Storm we designed our offensive to be brief and decisive to keep the trinity of war stable and ensure we didn't reach our own political and military culminating points. Thus, we massed overwhelming combat power, defeated the enemy quickly and decisively, and attained a decision.

We used Clausewitz's theories of attrition and annihilation in our attack into Iraq and Kuwait. These two terms are neither incompatible nor mutually exclusive, and, they are a continuum. The attrition/annihilation continuum meshed nicely with the limited nature of the war and our political objectives. For example, we used air attrition to reduce the enemy to an acceptable force level and lower his will to resist. We also used attrition to ensure our costs wouldn't be too high, thus unbalancing the trinity of war and breaking the will of our

people to persevere.

After reducing the enemy's power and morale, we used mass violence on the ground and in the air to annihilate him. Clausewitz would have approved of the way we used overwhelming combat power and focused violence to annihilate, achieve a quick decision, and control initiative. Since our political objectives dictated a limited war, we neither subjugated Iraq nor totally destroyed its military. But to satisfy our political objectives in a limited war setting and to keep the trinities of war balanced, we were forced into operations of attrition before we could annihilate Iraqi forces.

Clausewitz viewed war holistically. Smaller components, such as independent situations, engagements, battles, and campaigns link, comprising a larger whole, which links with other larger wholes. In turn, he viewed war as a smaller whole of politics -- one of many tools of diplomacy. Thus, Clausewitz viewed the battlefield as a complicated tapestry connected to even larger tapestries. This is his abstract rationale for asserting that politicians and generals must figure out the type of war they are about to embark upon, and agree upon desired end-states and criteria for success before the war starts.

Means to ends, regardless of subordination, can influence end-states and criteria for success. Because of the complex relationship between means and ends, the political leader must carefully control means, or they could create ends far different from those originally envisioned. Clausewitz's admonition

concerning means and ends was apropos in the Gulf War -- "ends and means must be examined ... in accordance with the effects and their relationship to one another." Our leaders in the Gulf War understood this relationship and kept military means subordinate to political ends.

CONCLUSIONS

Clausewitz's most important theories helped us plan and attain political objectives and execute military operations in the Gulf War. Theory helps us think; but it's not prescriptive. Clausewitz would have hoped his theory would retain its timeless aspects, but he would want us to change, in an artistic sense, the shape and texture of theory, or its application, to accommodate change in times and technology. Theory's application must be contextual to be effective, as times and technology dictate war's execution.

The outcome of the war was positive for us. I attribute a good part of that outcome to clear thinking. Coherence helps us think clearly about war, and Clausewitz's theories provide coherence. We clearly understood the relationship between political ends and military means, trinity of war, centers of gravity, limited war, defense-offense and attrition-annihilation continuums and how they related to limited war, and friction. Just as clearly, we need to gauge our opponent better, change our objectives if military means provide unforeseen advantages or disadvantages, and be willing to use increased violence to achieve our objectives.